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An attempt is made to relate the problem of the high school dropout to his early school experiences. Although no data are available at present to support the idea that the preschool program could reduce the incidence of later dropout, it is suggested that the problem of the high school dropout should be focused on the transition between preschool environment and the school.

While the middle class child is made aware of school from an early age, no such preparation is given to the lower social status child. Even though differences are acknowledged to exist, the curriculum is not organized on the basis of these cultural differences, and both sets of children are expected to proceed in school at the same rate. Because of differences in preparation, the lower class child is more likely to fail, with the result of gradual but effective alienation from school and the opportunity structure connected with it.

Successful solution of the problem would have to involve curriculum, teacher preparation, adequate economic school support, and improved school-community relationships. The suggested program would attempt to give the lower class child the necessary preparation for school that home, community, and relative affluence give to the middle class child. Skills to be developed would include visual and auditory perception, language skills, general information, familiarity with books, and development of curiosity. The child should be an active participant in the learning process, and the school should expect to do a portion of the task traditionally assigned to the home.

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EARLY SOCIAL TRANSITION and the DROPOUT PROBLEM

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Early Social Transition and the Dropout Problem

I do not intend here to swallow an elephant, since chewing a tiger is hard enough. So this paper will make no attempt to incorporate the total complex of social institutions involved in school failure, for this can lead only to a loss of the direction necessary to the carving out of relevant and malleable chunks of the problem. For this reason, the focus will be largely on the school, an institution that in itself cannot institute major social change, but one which can play a determining role in orienting its products. The school is, after all, the only social institution which has some contact with all children.

We know that there is variation in the impact of this contact from group to group, fostered by the preparation by the parents of the child for this contact, the general meaning of the school to the economic substance of the community, and in the expectations of the school and the appropriateness of the curriculum for the child. These differences in the interaction among the child, the school, and the community, are determined, among other things, by social attitudes toward education, stability of community, social class and ethnic membership of family, and sex of child.

Generally speaking, the middle-class child is more likely to have the importance of school imprinted in his consciousness from the earliest possible age. This is not necessarily bad or good for the child or the school, but it is very different from the preparation of the lower social status child. I have never seen a school curriculum that is organized on the basis of the existence of these differences. Though these are sometimes acknowledged to exist, nevertheless both sets of children are asked to climb the same mountain at the same rate, as if they had similar prior experiences and training. The lower-class child, because of poorer preparation, is at a

real disadvantage in this mountain climbing, though it is the middle-class child who probably has more personal anxiety about the success of his climb. However, the middle-class child has available to him other avenues for handling the school situation. There is more likely to be contiguity in the school-faculty orientation with his home-family orientation. Failure can be interpreted to him in appropriate and familiar terms, and methods of coping with it can be incorporated, increasing the motivation or offering the necessary rewards, goals, or punishments to effect the desired change in performance. For the middle-class child, the school is very central and is continuous with the totality of his life experiences. As a result, there are few incongruities between his school experiences and any others he is likely to have had, and there are intrinsic motivating and molding properties in the school situation to which he has been highly sensitized.

For the lower-class child there is not the same contiguity or continuity, and he does not have the same coping mechanisms for internalizing success or psychologically surviving failure in the formal learning setting. If the lower-class child starts to fail, he does not have the same kinds of operationally significant and functionally relevant support from his family or community--or from the school--that his counterpart has. Further, because of the differences in preparation, he is more likely to experience failure. It might even be that both groups are equally motivated, in terms of quantity of motivation, but failure or lack of recognition for the middle-class child might only serve to channel his energies more narrowly, while for the lower-class child it early becomes dysfunctional, converting the original motivation into a rejection of intellectual striving.

Failure in school for the middle-class child can be more personally

disorganizing because the continuity of values from home to school insures that such a child will be considered a failure in both places. However, as was already pointed out, there are also more resources available for helping the child to cope with the failure and to recover from it, and to mitigate its degree. For the lower-class child, school failure may result in less personal upset or disturbance, but may be more final, both in terms of recovery of adequate functioning in school and in terms of occupational choices. Such failure may have the result of gradually but effectively alienating the child from the school and the opportunity structure associated with it. In addition, though these parents may or may not be opposed to the specific act involved in the child's leaving school prematurely, they may have shared with the child their own personal affect regarding their experiences with social institutions. Particularly the minority group lower-class parent is likely to explain, rationalize, and attribute job and economic frustration, both correctly and incorrectly, to the operation of impersonal societal institutions. He may thus identify, accurately and inaccurately, these same institutions with his child's experience in school. This negative affect can rapidly and perhaps inadvertently be generalized to the whole school learning process. This kind of constellation has particular significance where the school system operates as a bureaucratic mechanism, isolated from the community, and unable to counteract the consequences of inadequate preparation for functioning in the school factory. So the school, at the time the child decides to leave it, has little influence with either the child or the parent, and even if it did, it is frequently just not programmed for interpreting process to non-middle-class children and adults.

Thus, if the school is to influence the continued attendance of children, the influence must begin and the channels for its transmission

must be opened well before the school failure and dropout problem arises.* This brings us to the first contact of the child and his parents with the school. The process of alienation or, on the other hand, of increasing rapport, begins here. It is at this level that certain crucial questions must be asked: First, is the child intellectually and psychologically ready for the school experience, for the specific curriculum, and for the demands of comprehension, communication, motor control, and timing made by the school? Here I am not referring to specific "readiness" as the term has been characteristically used in educational circles, but, rather, to the socio-cognitive preparations and anticipations of the child for this new experience. Next, are the parents helped to become aware of the school purpose, the nature of its demands on the child, how they--even if uneducated--can play a meaningful role in the education of their child? Is the school accessible to these parents? In other words, is it a place which stimulates embarrassment for their ignorance and fear of its power, or a center for comfortable contact and a sharing of their interest in their child? In this interaction among three elements, what about the school itself-- the third element? Is it a structure that the community can be proud of, and where staff can share this pride? Does it have teachers and administrators who see a challenge, or are they interested only in securing discipline and in surviving the day? Do they have some understanding of the social backgrounds of their children, the temporary limitations that might have been imposed by these backgrounds

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* Of course, not all dropouts are school failures (and there might even be instances when high-performance creative children should drop out of school--but that is another paper), but the evidence suggests that the majority are. Similarly, of course, all dropouts are not lower-status children, but again, the majority are, and I would postulate that with middle-class children there is a higher incidence among dropouts of psychological malfunctioning, while with lower-status children it is more likely to be associated with socio-cognitive dissonance, and general problems of communication.

(in terms of good schoolwork)? Is there a reasonable amount of staff stability, particularly in the early years? And is there some attempt to adjust the curriculum and primers to current life realities?

The answers to these questions we all really know. The experiences of the child from the disadvantaged background simply do not prepare him for successful school performance. The teacher has more often than not not been trained in the sociology of learning, and also more often than not her training fails to give her a sense of challenge in teaching children, particularly those who start out with handicaps. Usually she prefers, both by training and personal inclination, the immediately bright, responsive child who also most likely places a type of demand on her professional skills which is more congruent with the orientation of her training. The schools are more likely than not to be under-equipped, closed to the children for after-school experimentation with extra-curricular books and arts and crafts, and closed to the community as evening centers for learning and socializing. More likely than not, nobody explains to the parents how they can help or be important factors in the education of their child, and the whole process of their child's education--even for the few who become active in the P.T.A.'s--remains foreign and alien, and often their contact with the school carries a condescending quality. The early curriculum is likely to be unfamiliar, experientially discontinuous, while the primer, despite all criticism, is still most likely to be boring, repetitious, suburban, and altogether too white.

What have been stated here, of course, are some of the major problems of getting a grip on children from social and cultural backgrounds which do not participate in the middle-class values of the school. These problems are raised here not because it is now fashion-

able to lay at their door all of our current social difficulties, but because to me it is inconceivable to consider the problem of the high school dropout without focusing on the early relationship among the child, the family, and the school, and the transition between the pre-school environment and the school.

Considering all these combinations, factors, and circumstances, it is amazing that as many children as do still find sufficient relevance in the school experience to remain. In this context it might be noted parenthetically that the real occupational expectations of these children are more congruent with their homes and community experiences than they are with the school setting. It might be that only as school is perceived as being more functionally relevant to adult occupations, early negative experiences can become decreasingly influential in the decision to leave school. Here is not meant the Conant solution of simply more vocational high schools, but, rather, the same opportunity distribution for all populations, regardless of subgroup membership.

There are many possible avenues through which solutions for these problems might be evolved. But none of them exists independently, and any successful solution would have to involve a confluence of institutional changes on the level of the child, of the curriculum, of teacher preparation, adequate economic school support, and community-school bridges with two-way traffic. Nevertheless, there are certain possibilities for social intervention on the child-focused level that may open individual escape hatches and that might require minimal structural and process change in the current school operation. The most important of these areas of social intervention, and one that comes least into conflict with existing institutionalized barricades to change, would be that of an intensive, highly focused, pre-school training program.

There is no data at the present time which would prove that a

pre-school program could reduce the incidence of later dropout, (though such data would not be difficult to collect), so this paper must be considered a speculative discussion.

Such a pre-school program would attempt to give the child the antecedent preparations for school that the home, community, and at least relative affluence give to the middle-class child. Such programs could only be set up after intensive training of teachers and staff to work on the problems of communicating with the parents as well as developing methods and techniques for compensating the child for a narrowness of experiential variation. The attempt would be to enrich those developmental areas most functional and operative in the school learning situation, thereby establishing both cognitive and attitudinal continuity between the pre-school and the school years. Hopefully, knowing that the child is most responsive to acquiring basic skills in the pre- and early-school years, these skills can be fostered and their acquisition can thus help lay the basis for the reduction in school failure experiences and for an increase in school success. The skills referred to here would include, for example, the visual and auditory perception which underlie reading, language skills, spatial and temporal orientation, general information, familiarity with books, toys, games, and the development of a sustained curiosity. In addition, the attempt must be made to engage the child as an active participant in the learning process rather than as a passive recipient of a school experience.

In facilitating the learning process in these children, the school must expect frequently to do a portion of the job traditionally assigned to the home, and curriculum must be reorganized to provide for establishing a good base.

The child, from the time he enters school and is exposed to assumptions about him derived from experience with the middle-class

child, has few success experiences and much failure and generalized frustration. The frustration inherent in not understanding, not succeeding, and not being stimulated in the school, while being regulated by it, creates a basis for the further development of negative self-images and low evaluations of individual competencies.

It is important to emphasize that the early training to counteract this process is not a matter of inculcating middle-class values, but, rather, of reinforcing the development of those underlying skills that are operationally appropriate and necessary for both successful and psychologically pleasant school learning experiences. The fact that these skills are almost routinely stimulated in middle-class homes does not mean that in content they are middle-class: e.g., there is nothing fundamentally culturally loaded in a good or poor memory, but it can be awfully important in preparing for an examination.

Horizons and goals are stimulated early in life, and if the parents have had low ceilings in terms of variety of experiences, with the intensity being in terms of job insecurity, negotiations with welfare and landlords, and the like, there is not much left to give the child a sense of identifying the self with goals that take individual impetus and disciplining. This problem, in a larger context, is societal, and has its analogous aspects in the routinized existence of middle-class suburbia, rigid schedules, automated work, and cities and suburbs that share a sameness and drabness. Sometimes the excitement to be sparked in a child must reach his subjective self, his imagination and individual poetry. After this, he might make discriminations and differentiations not seen by his peers in the external world. This development of the inner self can certainly start soon after the development of language, and can be an intrinsic part of the pre-school experience, and possibly a basis for much later

motivation.

It is often in school that another element of the dropout problem related to another type of discrimination takes place--and it is an element that is often ignored. That is, the female dropout. Too often, discussions of dropouts concentrate on males, or handle all dropouts as an undifferentiated totality, without recognizing that many of the elements responsible for such a high dropout rate among Indian Americans, Negro Americans, etc., are similar in the case of females. Through a pre-school program, it was hoped that the increased preparation of the child would also modify the anticipations of the teacher, in that the child's increased responsiveness will create higher expectations of him by the teacher, and thereby feed back to the child. Here we were referring to children generally, to the whole area of teachers' expectations, and the tendency of children to either reach or bend for them. At some undefined point, our social expectations as reflected through our teachers, change in regard to anticipating differential intellectual behavior from boys and girls. This is probably not always a conscious distinction, but males of any social class are more or less expected to have to use their intellects in the business of preparing to make a living. For females, this assumption is less likely to be made, and the antecedent attitudes and seedlings are probably manifested in the pre-school and kindergarten. I know of no data for this, but there is no other known area of strongly ingrained social attitudes and expectations which is completely discontinuous with earlier, though not necessarily discernable, orientations, and it is unlikely that these expectations would have developed only later in the school years. I would expect that a high proportion of female school dropouts are intellectually average girls who have, proportionate to the boys, more academic success but who feel that

intellectual development and their personal futures go along divergent paths. With society increasingly needing skilled people, the distinction between male and female intellectual roles must be explicitly eliminated early in the learning process, if the later effects are to be minimized and school is to offer the same potential to children regardless of sex.

The emphasis in this paper on the pre-school program as a means of accommodation between the school and the child and his family represents, it is felt, a necessary approach to the dropout problem. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it from the other end of the continuum: the problem of the motivation of the high school student to join the labor force when the opportunities available to him may not be numerous or productive. Further, the high incidence of minority group dropouts makes necessary a consideration of prejudice in employment patterns. But these are broad societal problems, to be attacked and solved in the social arena. And if they were solved, the individual problems of the unprepared child coming into the unpreparing school would assume even greater importance. Developmentally, it would seem that this is one of the first areas in which to approach the problem, and one for which there may be less resistance.

There seems to be great need in mid-Twentieth Century America thoroughly to discuss all problems, investigate their causes, delineate possible solutions, and implement only those solutions that have been sufficiently skeletonized so that they no longer represent threats to the status quo. The danger to the approach discussed here is that it will be put into the context of the stress-free, quasi-"purposeful" play, psychologically-supportive, Momistically-oriented, de-intellectualized, sterile enclosures where much of early childhood education is located. If such takes place, social experimentation

in this area could have the fate previously indicated. But if the social scientists and educators undertake such a project jointly in a spirit of experimentation and with bovicidal collaboration against the accumulated sacred cows, the possibilities of success are greatly enhanced.